

### Self Expression Through Music

Positive self expression is a familiar concept to people of every origin, so there are recognizable expressions of positive emotions that span across cultures. The most basic form of positive self expression is a smile; before they can even speak, babies smile when they feel happy. Instinctual expressions of joy also include jumping up and down, calling out, and throwing one's arms in the air. Though singing and dancing are learned forms of expression, they too are universal ways cultures celebrate important happy moments. The "Happy Birthday Song" (or some version of it) can be heard all over the world on birthdays, and dancing is a common activity enjoyed at parties, weddings, and on other cheerful occasions. When voices are raised in song or bodies are seen moving in rhythm (or off rhythm) to a beat, it is natural for people's minds to jump right to "celebration!" However, what are often times considered forms of joyous expression become expressions of passionate pain in dark times.

The darkest time in American history was when slavery was practiced, so for slaves, singing was not an expression of joy as some assumed, it was an expression of sorrow. Frederick Douglass (1845/2005), a man who was born into slavery, escaped as a young man, and became an abolitionist, addressed this very subject in his published work, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*: "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness" (ch. 2). The fact that people from the north thought that slaves' singing was an indication of their happiness exemplifies perceptions about what it means to sing and how wrong those perceptions can be. Douglass goes on to say how incorrect the northerners were in assuming that the slaves were happy: "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an

aching heart is relieved by its tears” (ch. 2). Because slaves were subjected to such cruelty and hardship, the emotions that needed to be released from their hearts were not joyful; they were sorrowful. Song was one of the few outlets they could express themselves through, so their songs “told a tale of woe....they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery” (ch. 2). Song, something that is frequently associated with high spirits, became a channel to express deep sadness brought about by a wicked institution.

Dancing, another form of universal celebration, has also been used as a passionate expression of discontent. In a presentation on violence and nonviolence, Dr. Lindsay Michie (2018), an Associate Professor of History at the University of Lynchburg, discusses Apartheid in South Africa and how dance was used as a form of protest. The dance that Apartheid protesters used was called the toyi-toyi, and it emphasized their passion as they moved through the streets (Michie 2018). Their passion was evident as they danced tirelessly for miles to show how ardently they cared about ending Apartheid. Victims of Apartheid, a “system built on racism” (Michie 2018), used an ordinarily happy activity as a form of protest because life in South Africa for non-whites was brutal; the two watershed events Dr. Michie describes demonstrate how savagely they were treated. The first occurred on March 21, 1960 in Sharpeville, where sixty nine peaceful protestors were killed. In 1976, the second watershed event occurred in Soweto, where close to 1,000 people, including children, were massacred. Nelson Mandela (1994/2010) said that not until April 27, 1994, did “the black majority....go to the polls to elect their own leaders” (241). Non-white citizens were horribly mistreated and could not look to their country leaders for change because they had no say in government and were experiencing “government-

sponsored violence” (Michie 2018). Life for blacks in South Africa during Apartheid was cruel and unfair, so protesters used passionate dance to express their pain and desire for change.

Although it seems sad that forms of positive self expression are also used to express pain and discontent, music and other forms of art are good outlets to express such feelings and thoughts. Self expression in these forms offers an opportunity to release unwanted feelings and make powerful statements. I used music as an outlet for sadness in my own life when my grandma passed away last summer. I would listen to and sing sad songs, cry some, and then feel slightly better because I was able to release pent-up emotions. Song and dance, although often used as expressions of joy, can be and are used to express negative emotions in a passionate way.

#### References

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